Date and Time: Wednesday, August 9, 2023 5:53:00PM PDT

Job Number: 203218488

Document (1)

1. *For Ugandan activist, COVID curbs set new hurdle in climate fight*

   Client/Matter: -None-

   Search Terms: "climate justice"

   Search Type: Natural Language

   Narrowed by:

Content Type	Narrowed by
News	Sources: National Post (f/k/a The Financial Post)(Canada); Timeline: Jan 01, 2017 to May 31, 2023; All Content Types: News; Geography by Document: North America; Geography by Document: Canada

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For Ugandan activist, COVID curbs set new hurdle in climate fight

National Post (f/k/a The Financial Post) (Canada)

September 25, 2020 Friday

Web Edition

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Section: PMN ENVIRONMENT

Length: 400 words

Body

BUWAMA - In a run-down residential compound in Kampala, Vanessa Nakate thrusts her fist in the air as she rallies 30 young demonstrators to defend their planet against climate change.

"What do we want?" she shouts, to a ragged chorus of "***climate justice***." The youngest protester, two-year-old Manvir Ssozi, sucks his thumb as he flaps a placard that reads: "Money will be ... useless on a dead planet."

Nakate's demonstration in the Ugandan capital is part of a global day of youth action against climate change inspired by Sweden's Greta Thunberg.

A wiry and vivacious 23-year-old, Nakate founded a climate education movement last year and has more than 175,000 Twitter followers.

She had hoped to organize a bigger event, but that plan was derailed by COVID-19. Large gatherings are currently banned, and it frustrates her to see how such curbs have slowed the momentum she has built up.

"Coronavirus has affected our activism," she said. "The climate crisis is an equally major emergency that should be fought with the same determination."

When she's not organizing protests, Nakate equips schools with solar lighting and more efficient stoves, and her "Rise Up" movement" also lectures students on climate change and plants trees.

Her mission was given a new urgency by heavy floods that have displaced more than a million people across South Sudan, Sudan, Ethiopia and parts of Uganda - a region heavily dependent on agriculture.

"The present is catastrophic and the future is scary and very unpredictable," she told Reuters. "Ecosystems are collapsing."

The floods are linked to a seasonal weather variation that scientists say has been exacerbated by climate change. Warmer seas mean more water in the atmosphere and more rain, and near-surface temperatures in Uganda are also on the rise.

"It is literally a matter of life and death," Nakate said, as lightning streaked across dark clouds behind her.

For her, the climate change debate often ignores voices from developing countries bearing the brunt of fallout caused by more industrialized nations - a topic at the heart of Friday's global protests.

"The world was so focused on the California fires," she said. "When California was burning, communities in Africa were flooding - but where was the attention?" (Reporting by Elias Biryabarema; Editing by Katharine Houreld and John Stonestreet) !@COPYRIGHT=© 2020 Postmedia Network Inc. All rights reserved.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Subject: CLIMATE CHANGE (90%); COVID CORONAVIRUS (90%); PROTESTS & DEMONSTRATIONS (90%); CLIMATE ACTION (89%); CLIMATOLOGY (89%); COVID-19 CORONAVIRUS (78%); ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE (78%); NEGATIVE ENVIRONMENTAL NEWS (78%); SALTWATER ECOSYSTEMS (78%); FLOODS & FLOODING (77%); STUDENTS & STUDENT LIFE (75%); DEVELOPING COUNTRIES (69%); INTERNET SOCIAL NETWORKING (69%); DISPLACED PERSONS (64%); SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY (62%); CORONAVIRUSES (52%); VIRUSES (52%); buwama,residential,compound,kampala,vanessa,nakate !@PERMALINK= *https://nationalpost.com/pmn/environment-pmn/for-ugandan-activist-covid-curbs-set-new-hurdle-in-climate-fight* (%)

Industry: INTERNET SOCIAL NETWORKING (69%)

Person: GRETA THUNBERG (79%)

Geographic: KAMPALA, UGANDA (90%); CALIFORNIA, USA (90%); UGANDA (94%); SUDAN (91%); AFRICA (79%); ETHIOPIA (79%); SOUTH SUDAN (79%)

Load-Date: September 25, 2020

End of Document